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Steven Millhauser's Replicas and the World: Between the Actual and the Imaginary

Marie-Hélène Petit

1 In "Replicas", an article he published in 1995, Steven Millhauser explains his fascination for images and representations. Photographs, paintings, postcards, comic strips, and even cartoons indeed permeate his short fiction while accounting for his own literary aesthetics. What Millhauser calls replicas however holds a particular status among the images he uses in his short stories, partly because it is three-dimensional. As a lifelike representation of a real object, the replica (a wax apple for instance) can be mistaken for the actual object it stands for (a fresh ripe apple), whereas a two-dimensional image (a photographed apple) cannot.[1] For Millhauser, the aesthetic force of the replica thus reaches its climax once the viewer has been deceived. At that very moment, the replica creates a troubling experience: causing an uncomfortable and yet intriguing feeling of doubt as to what is real (authentic) and what is not, it temporarily leaves the viewer in an indefinite attitude toward the world. This, Millhauser explains, is due to the replica's ambiguous nature: "The replica hovers between two worlds, the world of authenticity and the world of artifice, and in its allegiance to both it betrays an uneasiness that is part of its fascination" (Millhauser 1995: 61). Reflecting on this particular ambiguity, I would like to examine why replicas are so often found in Millhauser's fiction and what they seem to tell us about the strange yet familiar realms of gift shops, department stores, amusement parks and museums – those privileged spaces where replicas (both two and three dimensional) often appear. More precisely, I would like to show how replicas can be seen to exemplify the author's response to a typical postmodern attitude to fiction as well as a reinvention of the romance such as Hawthorne practiced it in the nineteenth century. Most of the time, Millhauser's fiction represents ambiguous worlds where it is always difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is not. They are in fact always half real, that is, situated halfway between the world of the actual and another "imaginary" world where things always turn out to be reconstructions of the first

actual world. Focusing on the specificities of late twentieth century fiction, as opposed to those of the nineteenth century romance, I will examine the different ways in which Millhauser reinvents and adapts Hawthorne's aesthetic model to more contemporary concerns. This will be made clear first by looking briefly at the developments of the idea of mimesis from Hawthorne to realism to contemporary fiction, in order to delineate certain basic traits in the history of representations, and more importantly to see how replicas, instead of simply abolishing traditional distinctions, such as that of the actual and the imaginary, eventually extend the realm of the actual. I then propose to see how this redefinition of the actual takes place in the text, which, in Millhauser's case, involves the use and subversion of realist conventions like description, resulting in a completely different type of mimesis. This will lead me in turn to examine the relation between replicas and plot, as Millhauser's descriptive style often seems to disturb the linear progression of traditional narratives as well. However, I will show that replicas often invite us to read Millhauser's short stories as inner journeys of the mind, during which characters learn to see the imaginary fabric of the actual world.

The Replica: A Postmodern Image?

2 In "The Custom-House", his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne compares the art of storytelling to the effect of moonlight in a familiar room. Spiritualized by the uncanny atmosphere, he explains: "the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (Hawthorne 1983: 149). There are multiple ways of understanding what the author meant by that meeting ground, according to the way one understands the words "actual" and "imaginary". In the nineteenth century, Hawthorne first wanted to show the existence of an invisible reality which it was his goal, as a writer, to reveal. Contrary to his realist successors, Hawthorne believed that the real was not limited to the realm of the visible, and that the "imaginative faculty" would permit him to reveal that "There is something truer and more real, than what we can see with the eyes and touch with the fingers" (Hawthorne 1982: 999).[2] Such a view of reality is compatible with the romantic notion that the spiritual, and in Hawthorne's case, the imaginary can lead to some kind of human truth. But it is reasonable to assume that Hawthorne also had something else in mind when he mentioned a meeting ground between the Actual and the Imaginary. His work, as many critics have noted, is a highly reflexive one, and instead of representing the world as a pre-existing entity, which realist writers would later do, his tales and romances regularly point to the way his characters' imagination determine particular worldviews. Hawthorne, in other words, was interested in what Leon Chai calls "the formation of the external world through the formation of thought and consciousness" (Chai 2). *The Scarlet Letter* of course, but also stories like "Young Goodman Brown" or "Main Street" are based on this idea that the world hardly exists outside of man's limited frame of thought. In *The Scarlet Letter* and "Young Goodman Brown", Hawthorne was interested in the ways the Puritan mindset shaped a Puritan worldview, whereas in "Main-street", it is on the discursive and therefore controversial nature of History that he focused. The word "imaginary", in Hawthorne's work, thus not only refers to the traditional opposition between the actual and the fictional, but also to the distinction between the objective and the subjective. In the latter case, the "imaginary" is often synonymous with a subjective construction or reconstruction of the objective world.

The world, for Hawthorne, is therefore always half real and half imaginary in the sense that even though it has an objective validity, it is also inseparable from man's subjective perceptions. Interestingly enough, that second understanding of the Hawthornian dichotomy is very much echoed by the typical postmodern view of reality.

3 Unlike their realist predecessors, who believed in the ability of language to represent a pre-existing world in a perfectly accurate manner, postmodern writers consider reality as a mixture of facts and fiction or, more precisely, as a textualized and therefore constructed version of the world.[3] To achieve its goal, the realist novel is based on a practical or transitive conception of language: it points to a referent outside of the fictional world it creates. Unlike Hawthorne's romance but also, as we shall see, unlike the postmodern text, the realist novel refuses any kind of reflexivity, as this would in fact undermine the very illusion it tries to create. Instead, realism erases any form of subjective speech, trying to present itself as a neutral and objective discourse.[4] With the benefit of hindsight, however, one realizes that such a mimetic approach to language soon fails to represent the complexities of man's changing relation to the world. In the second half of the twentieth century, the rise of post-structuralism has continually emphasized the opposite idea that reality does not exist outside of language and that, as Derrida has it, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte." Realism then had to evolve toward new forms of writing and cope with its failure to take into account the textualized nature of reality.[5] So one way of looking at later modernist and postmodernist writing is to see how they have gradually adapted and reinvented the realist aesthetic to fit a more complex experience of the world. But while modernist writers have taken into account the intrinsic subjectivity of discourse, postmodernists have realized that the traditional distinction between objectivity and subjectivity may after all be meaningless. Millhauser's replicas thus point to the overlapping of the actual and the imaginary although, as we shall see, its ultimate objective has a much stronger aesthetic and philosophic impact.

4 A replica does not belong to a pre-existent world. As its name indicates, it replicates or duplicates an original. As a copy, it is therefore part of what Millhauser calls a "secondary world of objects" (Millhauser 1995: 50). So, by recognizing the increasing presence of replicas around us, and by presenting in many of his short stories places filled with such replicas (the department store probably being the best example of such places) Millhauser clearly suggests that our experience of the world most of the time is indirect, i.e. mediated by reproductions of all sorts.[6] Replicas therefore illustrate a new kind of encounter between what Hawthorne called the Actual and the Imaginary. It resembles the objective/subjective dichotomy I have identified in Hawthorne, but it also differs in that unlike Hawthorne, Millhauser actually questions such dichotomy. For unlike the realist sign, which presents itself as transparent, the replica strikes us as a particularly ambiguous object. Both the realist sign and the replica are meant to create an illusion. But while the former has no further objective so to speak, the latter wants to reveal itself for what it is: an illusion. The replica deceives and then reveals that it has deceived. As Milllhauser explains, the replica contains "a clue to its nature": "The true art of replication lies in imitating an object so perfectly that it may be mistaken for an original, *while at the same time it reveals its falseness*." (Millhauser 1995: 54)[7] As a reflexive sign, the replica thus reveals a connection to opposite ways of relating to the world. It first develops a realist connection to the world in that it copies

an actual object and substitutes itself to it. But, as soon as its artificiality has been revealed, it ceases to fit the realist paradigm and thus acquires a non-realist dimension. [8] As the non-realist sign reveals itself for what it is – a sign – it reveals its constructed nature and its own textuality. It is therefore neither subjective nor objective, neither real nor fictitious, or perhaps both at the same time. The replica thus shares with Hawthorne's romance a complex relation to the realm of the Actual (the authentic, which it copies) and the Imaginary (the world of artifice which makes it possible), but for different reasons and with different aesthetic and philosophic implications.

5 The aesthetic interest of the replica lies in its capacity to disturb, at least temporarily, the distinction between the authentic and the artificial, between the original and its copy. As it dramatizes our inability to distinguish between those two realms, the replica seems at first to turn Hawthorne's romantic view of truth into Baudrillard's postmodernist theory of the simulacrum, the idea that the sign hides nothing except its own self: « Le simulacre n'est jamais ce qui cache la vérité – c'est la vérité qui cache qu'il n'y en a pas. Le simulacre est vrai » (Baudrillard 9). Yet, even though Millhauser does seem to ponder on the ontological nature of the world as we experience it today, he successfully bypasses the nihilist dead-end of Baudrillard's theory. Millhauser's replicas indeed solve the postmodern aporia by deliberately including replicas into the realm of the actual. Instead of simply pointing to the overlapping of the actual and the imaginary, as Hawthorne did, Millhauser eventually extends the realm of the actual as well as our own cognitive boundaries in the process described by Marc Chénetier: « Lecture du monde, ajout du monde, enrichissement du monde, l'imagination de l'ailleurs n'en fait pas s'évader mais le prolonge, instaure avec lui un rapport plus étroit. » (Chénetier 8-9). In other words, Millhauser's replicas represent much more than simply a crossing of traditional boundaries or a radical assertion about the "unreality of reality".[9] Instead, Millhauser reveals to us something deep and crucial about the post-romantic world we live in: that the artifice is no longer opposed to reality (as Hawthorne thought) but has become part and parcel of it. A new responsibility therefore falls to us, which is to unravel our own complex and puzzling relation to a world half authentic, half artificial, exploring even a sense of our own identity. Millhauser's replicas thus illustrate how our everyday world (department stores, museums, amusement parks, etc.) has left room to a strange and yet familiar world: a world of reproductions, which completes it rather than substitutes itself to it. I now propose to examine how this process takes place in the text.

The Replica in the Text

6 I have suggested that in questioning our ability to recognize the real (the authentic), replicas also destabilize our expectations from a traditional realist mode of writing. I now propose to show how the realist discourse gets indeed transformed in Millhauser's short stories. Mainly, this is achieved through the two processes I have just presented: the blending of the authentic and the artificial, and that of the objective and the subjective. The aesthetic and philosophical implications of the replica are in fact ill-suited to the realist principles of transparency, coherence, and objectivity.[10] Yet, replicas introduce themselves in Millhauser's short stories in ways that are very reminiscent of the realist discourse, with a style based on descriptions and list making, which Philippe Hamon has noted characterize the realist genre (Hamon 1993).

Attention to visual details, minute representations of objects and the creation of an overall life-like effect correspond indeed to the realist writer's main objectives. But this, as Millhauser shows, is also the only way replicas can achieve their primary purpose, which is to deceive: "Because the replica by its very nature seeks to resemble another object, it is always characterized by meticulous attention to detail, by a kind of scholarly or fanatical precision" (Millhauser 1995: 51). This meticulousness characterizes many of Millhauser's characters, as for example Heinrich Graum, in "The New Automaton Theatre". As a master in the art of automatons, Graum's goal is to achieve life-like perfection:

> For six long years he analyzed and dissected the automaton face, studying the works of the masters and trying to penetrate the deepest secrets of expressivity. During this entire period he completed not a single figure, but instead accumulated a gallery of some six hundred heads, many of them in grotesque states of incompletion. (Millhauser 1998: 100)

7 The expert in the art of replicas, Millhauser shows here, must have a realist propensity so to speak. He must know how to look at things in such a way as to reproduce every detail that will make his replica look authentic. Such experts can be found in many stories, including "Cathay", "Eisenheim the Illusionist", "The Dream of the Consortium", "Paradise Park", "An Adventure of Don Juan" or "In the Reign of Harad IV", to name just a few, where artist figures excel in the art of the miniature, magic, industrial reproduction, landscaping and what not. But undoubtedly, the most talented illusionist of all is Millhauser himself, whose own textual worlds can be seen as yet another kind of replica.

8 Millhauser's writing is based on the same aesthetic principle as the replicas he disseminates in his stories. Like them, it has a strong realist propensity, but in its reflexive artificiality, also conveys a sort of strangeness that defamiliarizes the primary world it refers to. The first tendency is especially obvious in the meticulous descriptions which often appear syntactically in the text in the form of lists or catalogs. One of the best examples is no doubt this excerpt from "The Dream of the Consortium", where countless items available in the department store are enumerated in a paratactic style, somehow reminiscent of what happens in Emile Zola's inventory in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, a typical realist device, according to Hamon:

> In the new emporium, with its noble and feverish desire to surpass its rivals and recapture, in the last decade of the twentieth century, the vanished glory of the great department stores, you could purchase quartz heaters, power mowers, Venetian palazzi, electric pencil sharpeners, Scottish castles, cordless phones with ten-channel autoscan, flying buttresses, mulching tractors, Neolithic villages, aluminum siding, the palace of Sargon II, the Erie Canal, wax museums, submersible sump pumps, Sumerian ziggurats, islands with palm trees and crashing surf, ancient Troy, motorized wheelchairs, Viking burial mounds, the Great Mosque of Córdoba, lagoons, sphinxes, exercycles, black leather recliners, Upper Paleolithic caves with drawings of bison, three-ring circuses, the Colossus of Rhodes, bo-tree shrines, Coca-Cola bottling plants, Mutoscopes, zoom lenses, cabahs, African diamond mines, Benedictine monasteries, ice-cream makers, the Library of Alexandria, Zouave uniforms, opera theatres, five-speed drill presses, clavicembali, film-noir stage sets, deserts with mirages, cotton-gins, hennins, steaming square miles of Amazon jungle, old piers with seagulls. (Millhauser 1998:140)

9 Yet, such a list does not particularly convey any feeling of a coherent, well-ordered world. Instead, it creates an effect of confusion and chaos, rendered by the arbitrariness of unlikely juxtapositions. This, it should be noted, is exactly one of the

ways replicas point to their own illusive nature: "geographical incongruity" (Millhauser 1995: 53), like that of "Venetian palazzi" in a department store, or that of "ice-cream makers" next to "the Library of Alexandria" becomes in the text what I would call syntactic incongruity. The effect is all the more confusing as the list erases all distinctions between the replica of an original object (pointing to a single referent like the Great Mosque of Córdoba) and that of "a multiple object" (Millhauser 1995: 51), which is not the copy of an original but only part of an industrial series. The way replicas violate this fundamental distinction in the text represses any kind of hierarchy between the unique and the serialized and corrupts so to speak the customer's as well as the reader's gaze. Such transgression however is clearly part of Millhauser's defamiliarization technique. The syntactic arbitrariness of the list draws our attention to both the way replicas represent and (dis)organize the world within the limited space of the department store, and to the way the text itself points to its own linguistic limitations. As Arthur Saltzman notices, while the list "sustains and systematizes the world's mortal hoard, it confesses, without succumbing to, its own insufficiencies", that is, the "inadequacy of language to represent the world in full". (Saltzman 150)

10 In the worlds of Millhauser, descriptions hold a privileged status because they are part and parcel of the characters' experience. Most stories in fact deal with the discovery by a character, or a group of characters, of a new world: a department store, an amusement park, or a museum, but also a penny arcade, a sea village, a garden in England, a maze under the town, etc. In all of these stories, descriptions and lists are given pride of place because they are part of a life-changing experience, which usually affects the characters' vision and worldview. In their endless, sinuous shape, lists mimic the characters' trajectory and gaze as they meander around the streets, chambers and labyrinthine alleys of the various places they visit. But during the course of such journeys, readers realize that the various environments described are always partly, and sometimes completely, fabricated. In "The Sepia Postcard", the protagonist escapes to a small sea village called Broome, where he hopes to get over a sentimental crisis. Seeking also some kind of estrangement from the routine and pressure of city life, he describes at length the new place where he has planned to stay for a few days. His first mention of the place, however, is not based on his first impressions as he arrives in the village, but on a picture from a promotional brochure: "The brochure had shown sunny red-and-white buoys lying against piles of slatted lobster pots, with brilliant blue water beyond." (Millhauser 1990: 93) Aware of course of the discrepancy between the sunny Broome of the brochure and the drizzling Broome he is visiting, the protagonist continues his journey and peers into the windows of several gift shops. What he sees there is a jumble of miniatures, photographs, and other various kinds of objects, with or without any connection to the local folklore:

> I passed two gift shops and entered a third. [...] I looked at the flashlight pens that said BROOME; the little straw brooms with wooden handles that said BROOME; erasers shaped like chipmunks, rabbits, and skunks; little slatted lobster pots containing miniature red plastic lobsters; tiny white-and-gray seagulls perched on wooden piles the size of cigarettes; porcelain thimbles painted with lighthouses; little wind-up kangaroos that flipped over once and landed on their feet; foot-high porcelain fishermen with pipes and yellow slickers; red wax apples with wicks for stems; a rack of comic postcards, one of which bore the legend LOBSTER DINNER FOR TWO and showed two lobsters in bibs seated at a table before plates of shrimp; black mailboxes with brass lobsters on them; sets of plastic teeth that clacked noisily when you wound them up; a bin of porcelain coin banks shaped like lobster

> pots, Victorian houses with turrets, and mustard-covered hot dogs in buns; and a basket of red, blue, and green brachiosauruses. (Millhauser 1990: 95-6)

11 Again, the list is achieved in one very long sentence stretching into a series of noun clauses, punctuated by semicolons. As in "The Dream of the Consortium", the description achieves less an *effet de réel* than a sort of estrangement, denaturalizing a familiar environment (the village could be practically any sea village) by focusing on reproductions of disjointed items from that environment. The emphasis put on the copies of the world (photographs, postcards, miniatures, and other like replicas) rather than the world itself reminds us that our perception is always mediated by some visual or linguistic sign.[11] Unlike what happens in a traditional realist story, Millhauser's characters indeed access to the world in an indirect way. The very same thing happens again in "The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman", a story from his last collection. The narrator tries to remember the face of Elaine, a young woman who disappears one day, but as he searches through his memory, he realizes that the only clue he can get is based on a few pictures, all of them somewhat incomplete, as for example this one: "The photograph was slightly overexposed, making her seem a little washed out, a little flat – there was a bright indistinctness about her." (Millhauser 2008: 23)

12 Such replicas, we realize, whether exact or miniature copies, whether two- or three-dimensional images, are of course limited and unsatisfactory versions of the people or objects they represent. The various pictures of Elaine Coleman do not solve the mystery of her identity for the narrator, whereas the pictures of Broome and other folkloric knickknacks lock the place into an idealized or romanticized version of itself, both familiar and strange, both actual (real) and imaginary (artificial). But what are we to make of this inadequacy of both language and images to represent the world? Aren't we eventually confronted with the same dilemma that realist writers were? To answer this question, it is necessary to look at the way replicas and similar visual experiences interact with the linear progression of the story from beginning to end.

The Replica and the Plot

13 Focusing on the visual effects of the replicas, or on the places which contain them, Millhauser's descriptions and lists first seem to conflict with the traditional plot-oriented short story, as popularized by Edgar Allan Poe. Put differently however, Millhauser's "plots" can be said to deal with the experience of seeing, attaching itself rather to the allegorical and sketch models commonly found in the work of Hawthorne. I refer here to both the author's "hermeneutic dramas" (e.g. "Young Goodman Brown" or "Rappaccini's Daughter") and sketches (less famous but nonetheless typically Hawthornian stories like "Sights from a Steeple", "Little Annie's Ramble" or "Night Sketches").[12] Commenting on what he considers is the "dual tradition" of the American short story, Walter Evans distinguishes the sketch from the "incident-oriented" tale: "The sketches are less plotted, more properly to deal with everyday occurrences of 'common life' and are more involved with poetic perception of the present and commonplace". (Evans 317) This is in fact a very accurate way of describing what Millhauser accomplishes in many of his short stories. In an interview, the author himself explains the way he views the art of story writing: "Stories are visions. I write down pictures in my mind. [...] Nothing interests me except the vision itself".[13] The experience of seeing indeed becomes a rite of passage, a sort of inner quest, whose goal

is the intimate experience of getting to know the world better by looking at it in a different way, overcoming "the habit of not seeing."[14] In "The Penny Arcade", a young boy engages in such a journey. As he prepares to walk into the darkness of the penny arcade, it is, he says, as if the world was "on the verge of revealing an overwhelming secret" (Millhauser 1985: 135). But as he fails to recognize the creatures that had enchanted his childhood two years earlier, the boy eventually prepares to walk back into the sunshine, disappointed, before he makes this important discovery:

> All at once I understood the secret of the penny arcade.
> I understood with the force of an inner blow that the creatures of the penny arcade had lost their freedom under the constricting gaze of all those who no longer believed in them. Their majesty and mystery had been crushed down by the shrewd, oppressive eyes of countless visitors who looked at them without seeing their fertile inner nature. Gradually worn down into a parody of themselves, restricted to three or four preposterous wooden gestures, they yet contained within themselves the life that had once been theirs. Under the nourishing gaze of one who understood them, they might still spring into a semblance of their former selves. During the strange hush that had fallen over the arcade, the creatures had been freed from the paralyzing beams of commonplace attention that held them down as surely as the little ropes held down Gulliver in my illustrated book. I recognized that I myself had become part of the conspiracy of dullness, and that only in a moment of lavish awareness, which had left me confused and exhausted, had I seen truly. I saw that I was in danger of becoming ordinary, and I understood that from now on I would have to be vigilant. (Millhauser 1985:144-5)

14 As he prepares to grow into the world of adolescence and adulthood, what the protagonist realizes is the power of the enchantment that he is in fact about to lose. Maturing into a grown person, he realizes, is facing "a conspiracy of dullness", that is, the danger of failing to see the imaginary under the surface of actual things. In this case, it is failing to recognize the imaginary world the wooden automatons of the penny arcade can give access to. A slightly different kind of experience affects an adult character in "Balloon Flight, 1870". Ascending through the air in time of war, the protagonist gradually loses sight of the actual world down on the ground and experiences a sense of estrangement: "It is as if a rift has opened; a fissure; a wound; yes; not the bullet's scratch, but an inner crack; and there in that blackness, all's without meaning." (Millhauser 1998: 149) This time, the visual effect that is created by the ascension in the balloon conveys a moral indifference and a loss of meaning. In the chaos of war, the aloofness of the blue sky is more reassuring, more actual somehow than the miniature world below, which has become too abstract and too imaginary for the narrator to feel any connection to it. "I must be vigilant", he concludes too.

15 As Hawthorne likes to describe the construction of his characters' outlook, Millhauser focuses on his own characters' ability to see or not the world around them. And as Hawthorne describes the way his characters worldview becomes fashioned, pondering on the relationship between the actual and the subjective, Millhauser draws our attention to the dangers of not seeing: the indifference that at any time may alter his characters' as well as our relation to the world and their ability to identify and give sense to this particular relation. This feeling of indifference, whether visual or moral (often both), is what his characters always try to struggle against, more or less successfully. Where replicas are involved, this struggle often consists in recognizing an original from its copy. But in worlds where the actual and the imaginary fiercely compete with each other, it is not always easy to see clearly, as happens in "The Dream of the Consortium". Here, the art of replication reaches such perfection that the replica

becomes more lifelike than its original, blurring again the boundaries between the authentic and the fake: "Rigorous experts were producing replicas so skillful that the original had begun to seem a little flawed, a little faded and unconvincing". (Millhauser 1998: 140) This passage is a good illustration of the power of replicas to "secretly undermine the world of primary objects": "No longer do they aspire merely to equal the original objects, they wish to surpass them, to claim superiority by virtue of their playfulness." (Millhauser 1995: 60) So it is not long before the customers eventually confuse the artificial world of the consortium with the actual world outside. By the end of the story, the gradual loss of hierarchy between the authentic and the replicated is completed:

> As we hurry along the sidewalk, we have the absurd sensation that we have entered still another department, composed of ingenuously lifelike streets with artful shadows and reflections – that our destinations lie in a far corner of the same department – that we are condemned to hurry forever through these artificial halls, bright with late afternoon light, in search of a way out. (Millhauser 1998:143)

16 Instead of the revelation which takes place in "In the Penny Arcade" or "Balloon Flight, 1870", here, the characters' vision becomes blurred. In other words, the plot does not lead the characters to an epiphany, but describes instead the gradual loss of the ability to see clearly and distinguish the actual from the fake. As a counter-epiphany maybe, the story in any case makes us, readers, witness the ontological consequences of such failure to see.

17 The superimposition of the actual and the artificial, which takes place in the characters' eyes in "The Dream of the Consortium", reminds us of Hawthorne's idea of an encounter between the Actual and the Imaginary in that two conflicting realms eventually merge to reveal an essential truth about the world – a truth invisible to the naked eye. But in Millhauser's department store, the actual and the imaginary also meet for more complex reasons than just the illustration of an invisible truth. Because the material world of the consortium is made of man's reproductions of the world, replicas invite us to acknowledge the fact that they have become inseparable from that world. But more than that, they remind us of the moral responsibility involved in our own acts of perceptions. Seeing is no longer the innocent or romantic act that relates us to our environment and acknowledges the existence of God. It becomes a profoundly human act involved in the process of constantly (re)evaluating and making sense of a man-made world. As both part of the actual world and of an imaginary representation of the world, replicas indeed question long-established truths: "And don't they seem to ask us, though teasingly, how we can be certain that the other world, the solid world of real objects from which they draw their being, is itself not a deception?" Millhauser asks (Millhauser 1995: 60). By its dual and ambiguous nature, replicas never cease in fact to question, not the existence of the world itself, as Millhauser teasingly suggests, but the boundaries of our own complex relation to the world.

The Replica and the World

18 The apparent substitution which takes place at last in the department store suggests that it is no longer the authenticity of single original items that is put into question, but that of the entire world. The map of the empire ends up covering the empire itself, as J. L. Borgès would have it.[15] In its endless extension of the world of the buyable, the department store for example plans to offer, we learn, exact replicas of entire

countries. Allowing customers to travel "abroad" without actually leaving the country, these replicas beg interesting questions about the nature of geographical space and boundaries. What does it mean to be in America? Where exactly are American borders situated? What is America? Such are the questions one ponders on while reading "The Dream of the Consortium." The "dream" of the consortium may well have something deeply insightful to reveal about what we think is the actuality of America – and of the world at large. In this eccentric department store, where all traditional boundaries are crossed at will, one realizes like the young boy in the penny arcade, that the imaginary somehow always remains under the surface of actual things, and that the borders of America may actually be situated further than we think in the convoluted geography of our minds.

19 But limiting "The Dream of the Consortium" to a cultural or referential reading (an allegory of America) seems somehow frustrating as soon as one has grown familiar with Millhauser's playful worlds – an idea confirmed by Millhauser himself: "If a story dissolves into allegory – if the story is nothing but a way of talking about something else – then for me it's without interest. If a story is what it appears to be – say, a strange department store – and in addition can be read as an allegory, then it gains power" (Petit: 437). For just as replicas do, Millhauser's stories always point in two opposite directions: the actual world and the world of artifice. Replicas, the author insists, "have an enhanced or double being, since they include not only themselves but what they mimic". (Millhauser 1995: 50) Thus, when replicas no longer mimic isolated objects, but put together create entire new worlds, they can be seen both as imaginary representations of the actual world and as fictitious and independent realms. Such fabricated kingdoms can be found in "An Adventure of Don Juan", "The Dome" or "The Other Town" for instance. That last example speaks volumes about Millhauser's aesthetics thanks to the different readings it permits. In this short story, the author imagines an artificial town mimicking another actual one: "The other town, the one that exactly resembles our town, lies just beyond the north woods" (Millhauser 2008:133). Just like the replicas it contains, the short story also points in opposite directions: it can be read mimetically, as referring to the actual world or it can be read as a self-sufficient text, having no other referent than the imaginary world it creates. The first reading is perhaps the most obvious, as the story delineates the history of replication, dating back, the narrator says, to around 1685, and describes the different stages of that art: "the record for well over one hundred years indicates an increasing concern for meticulous replication" (135), and "We're now in the midst of a more satisfactory experiment in which the real and the replicated are carefully intermingled" (137) would be a suitable introduction to a short history of mimesis. Replicas, it is also suggested, have in fact always existed, albeit in different degrees of artfulness and resemblance to the actual world. They are even presented as a necessary part of our lives:

> Although it strives to resemble our town precisely, in fact it offers us freedom unthinkable at home. There, we can penetrate other houses at will, cross forbidden boundaries, climb unfamiliar stairways, enter secret rooms. All that is closed to us, in our town, is open there, all that's hidden is seen. This shattering constriction, this sensation of expansion, of exhilarating release, is in my view the real purpose of the other town, which for all its stillness invites us into a world of dangerous and criminal pleasures. (138)

20 Here, it seems quite clear that Millhauser is in fact celebrating the powers of imagination, as he was also doing in "The Barnum Museum": an opposite and complementary realm that one needs to visit regularly, to escape the pressures of too dull and ordinary lives. The "other town" as well as the various artificial places invented by Millhauser can be seen to stand for the imaginary space that we are all looking for in our minds. The other town could also be Millhauser's story itself, that reflexive world his stories often seem to point at. But such readings, in their allegorical relation to the world, may enclose the text in a too strictly delineated interpretive framework. For in Millhauser's world, one should again insist, the imaginary always competes with the real, so that one should perhaps avoid any definitive referential reading. "The Other Town" therefore, is more than just an allegory of the history and the powers of art and can also be seen as a new and independent world. This story, in other words, like many others written by Millhauser, has us look both ways, just like the narrator. Caught between the two towns, as between two readings, the reader, eventually, is invited like the narrator to imagine a third way:

> That's when you can stop for a moment, midway along the path, and turn your head in both directions: toward the other town, which shimmers through the thick branches of oak and pine, and toward our town, almost obscured by the woods but still showing through. Exactly where I am, when I stand there and look both ways, who can say? (143)

21 Eventually, Millhauser shares with Hawthorne a strong skepticism as well as an ambivalent debt toward realism, a deep moral sense of responsibility toward the act of seeing and last but not least an allegorical propensity (although as I said, his short stories are like Hawthorne's not typically or exclusively allegorical). Steven Millhauser's short stories reveal the richness and aesthetic force of replicas, which in turn speak volumes about the author's art. Their ambiguity, like Millhauser's, moves us away from the older kind of replication that realism used to offer. They move us away also from other mimetic traditions, as for example, the romantic one, in its idealized celebration of originality and authenticity. Already aware of the strong, alienating powers of art, Hawthorne suggested in one of his tales that imagination could still allow us to re-conquer a sense of the authentic: "Art has become a stronger Nature; she is a step-mother", he explains in "The New Adam and Eve", "whose crafty tenderness has taught us to despise the bountiful and wholesome ministrations of our true parent. It is only through the medium of imagination that we can loosen those iron fetters, which we call truth and reality, and make ourselves even partially sensible what prisoners we are" (Hawthorne 1982: 746). The world, Hawthorne explains, is bound to the realist principle, in that one most often tends to confuse the authentic and the fabricated or the cultural. Hawthorne used to imply that the imaginary world of the romance would help him and his readers draw the line between those different realms. Later, realists erased that line confidently, expecting their readers to recognize the actual world in the mirror of their texts. Today, Millhauser does not simply accept or reject that line, but playfully messes with it, creating both strange and familiar worlds that, paradoxically enough seem more "real", and here I mean authentic, than any other type of mimesis would.

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NOTES

1. Although this distinction is necessary to understand part of the author's aesthetics, Steven Millhauser includes both two and three-dimensional objects in his analysis of replicas; I will too.
2. This quotation was taken from one of Hawthorne's famous tales, "Rappaccini's Daughter".
3. For Philippe Hamon, the realist discourse is characterized by at least the two following preconceptions: the world exists as a legible entity outside of language and language can represent it faithfully. (Hamon 1982).
4. The best example is the traditional omniscient point of view associated to a third person narrative.
5. « Ce n'est jamais, en effet le 'réel', que l'on atteint dans un texte, mais une rationalisation, une textualisation du réel, une reconstruction *a posteriori* encodée dans et par le texte » (Hamon 1982 : 129).

6. The three-dimensional replica is the most extreme example of such mediation, but two-dimensional images and even linguistic constructs also work the same way.
7. My emphasis.
8. By "non-realist", I mean both "reflexive" and "imaginary."
9. I am using Raymond Federman's words, for whom "America is a fiction" referring of course not to the actuality of America, but to our vision and understanding of America (Federman 5).
10. Philippe Hamon again particularly insists on the coherence and legibility of the world in « Le Discours contraint .»
11. The pun on "broom"/"Broome" hints at the intimate connection between the linguistic and the visual sign, and also suggests our semiotic relation to the world.
12. I am borrowing here the words of Deborah Madsen who refers to Hawthorne's tales as "hermeneutic dramas" in *Allegory in America* (Madsen: 116).
13. "Steven Millhauser. Interview". *Failbetter.com* 27, Issue available on: http://www.failbetter.com/27/MillhauserInterview.php?docheck=yes
14. I borrow the expression from Steven Millhauser himself, in a yet unpublished interview he graciously allowed me to conduct.
15. This image is also used by Jean Baudrillard to describe the simulacrum.

ABSTRACTS

Les nouvelles de Steven Millhauser fourmillent de ce que l'auteur appelle, dans l'un de ses essais, des « répliques » : ces objets seconds qui reproduisent et se substituent à des objets premiers (authentiques). Mais l'omniprésence de ces répliques est telle que les grands magasins, les musées, les villes et autres espaces imaginaires créés par l'auteur dans ses nouvelles, finissent par se présenter comme des répliques du monde lui-même. En brouillant les frontières traditionnelles qui séparent authenticité et artificialité, les répliques déforment le regard des personnages et posent des questions fondamentales sur la nature du réel. Qu'est-ce que le réel ? Pouvons-nous éviter d'entretenir un rapport artificiel au réel ? En jouant avec les pouvoirs de l'illusion, Millhauser utilise les répliques pour suggérer une vérité plus profonde sur le monde que la transparence réaliste ne le permettait autrefois. Cet article propose d'envisager les répliques comme étant au coeur de l'esthétique de Millhauser, mais aussi comme une réinvention postmoderne de ce que Hawthorne appelait la romance : cette rencontre qu'il décrit dans sa préface à *La Lettre écarlate* entre le réel (the Actual) et l'imaginaire (the Imaginary).

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